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ABSTRACT

Today, school personnel and students are exposed to an increasing number of tragic events. Psychologists have the opportunity to become the architect, initiator, trainer, service provider, and principal's advisor for crisis situations in the schools. For psychologists to become indispensable in the schools their roles can no longer be limited to assessment and identification of students in need of special education services, helping teachers manage the behavior problems of students, and supporting student's self-esteem. To become indispensable, school psychologists' role must be expanded to include planning and implementing interventions to address crises that impact school staff and students. Psychologists need to educate themselves about crisis intervention and then be ready to become involved in crisis prevention, intervention, postvention, education, training, and support services. Psychologists should advocate steps in the direction of prevention as well as intervention and should be a proactive force to use each crisis experience as a learning experience. Four school related crisis skills arenas on which school psychologists should focus and four steps outlined by the National Institute of Mental Health are provided. (JBJ)

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*Chapter Twenty-Five*

# Making Psychology in the Schools Indispensable: Our Role in Crisis Intervention

**Karen A. Young, Scott Poland, & Loysanne Griffin**

Forty years ago events that affected school staff and students were minor in comparison to those we read about in newspapers and see on television today. Principals listened to complaints about things like students' gum chewing, running in the halls, and not putting paper in the wastebasket. Today, school personnel and students are exposed to an increasing number of tragic events, including abuse, assaults, homicides, death, suicide, gang warfare, weather-related disasters, and accidents. In addition, our nation's geographically mobile population, economic reversals, downsizing of companies and layoffs, and high divorce rate are resulting in an increasing number of students who are affected by the stresses of their parents as well as their own experiences.

## What is a Crisis?

Pitcher & Poland (1992) interpret a crisis as an important and seemingly unsolvable problem with which those involved feel unable to cope. It is the perception of the individual that defines a crisis—not the event itself. The individual in crisis will have a very difficult time negotiating life while in this crisis state and rational thought processes and objectivity in confronting and "thinking through" a problem are temporarily lost. People respond to events in different ways and to varying degrees. Young children may react with whining and clinging behaviors, night terrors, school avoidance, and aggression. Reactions of young adolescents can include somatic complaints, academic failure, and rebellion, whereas older teens might exhibit agitation or decreased energy levels, irresponsible or delinquent behaviors, concentration problems, and less interest in the opposite sex (Sandoval, 1988). Furthermore, adults often have problemswith decision-making, inertia, disorganization, and emotional lability.

## Our Current Role

For psychologists to become indispensable in the schools their roles can no longer be limited to assessment and identification of students in need of special education services, helping teachers manage the behavior problems of students, and supporting student's self esteem. To become indispensable, our role must be expanded to include planning and implementing interventions to address crises that impact school staff and students. Planning and implementing crisis interventions must be viewed as ever-evolving tasks that should be listed as priorities in the job descriptions of psychologists, administrators, and other school personnel. Psychologists are in the unique position to have expertise about the



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psychology of crisis events as well as the developmental stages of children and adolescents (Sandoval, 1988).

### Preparing Ourselves

Experiencing a crisis first-hand is not the optimal method to prepare ourselves to assist school personnel and students. Pitcher and Poland (1992) pointed out that most crisis planning is done in the aftermath of traumatic events. Unfortunately, school personnel lack training, preparation, and planning in this important area and have a tendency to believe that a crisis will not occur at their school. One only has to read the newspaper to be bombarded by the volume, intensity, and severity of school crisis situations. It is likely that any situation that one could imagine as too horrific to have ever happened has probably already occurred, and been dealt with by school personnel.

There are several ways psychologists can educate themselves about crisis intervention. Knowledgeable professionals present workshops and publish literature that provide excellent information on this topic. Local, state, and national psychological organizations offer convention sessions. In addition, university level courses furnish practical advice. Lastly, psychologists may seek consultation and supervision with other professionals who have expertise. These strategies can do much to prepare psychologists for the time the telephone rings with the news of a crisis.

### Marketing Ourselves

Becoming indispensable begins with promoting the range of services that psychologists can furnish, both directly and indirectly, to students, school personnel, and parents. After seeking appropriate training to ensure competency, psychologists should be ready to become involved in crisis prevention, intervention, postvention, education, training, and support services. To that end, psychologists need to be assertive and take a proactive approach.

Many psychologists who are not employed by the schools, but who have excellent skills in individual, family, and group therapy, find numerous obstacles when faced with intervention in a system such as a school district. For this reason, taking the role of a consultant many prove useful. After having received an initial invitation for involvement, approaching school personnel with, "let's put our heads together to see if we can avoid some of these problems next time" or "some other districts have had some nice ideas to avoid this sort of thing; what do you think?" may be the beginning of a long and constructive collaboration (Pitcher & Poland, 1992).

Psychologists can empower school personnel with the knowledge that preparation and practice will lead to quicker and appropriate response, less contagion effects, and resolution of a crisis event. How can this be done? Some suggestions include (a) reminding administrators of your areas of expertise; (b) writing memos, advisories, or "how to" information sheets for distribution; (c) providing copies of literature to administrators; (d) volunteering to give presentations, inservices, workshops; (e) being visible and available, and offering to consult and attend meetings and staffings; (f) consulting with other professionals on the local, state, and national level; and (g) offering a wide variety of psychological services that extend beyond evaluations.

### Train and Support School Personnel

School administrators historically have not received training in the area of crisis intervention. Most school personnel are not prepared for a crisis and have been caught with their "plans down" (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). All school personnel who interact with students including counselors, teachers, psychology interns, librarians, secretaries, aides, custodians, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers must be taught the basics of crisis

prevention, intervention, and resolution. This training can be accomplished through group presentations, collaboratively developing and writing crisis intervention plans, facilitating crisis drills, and preparing and distributing handouts. During an actual crisis event, psychologists should be on-site to advise school personnel and model appropriate intervention strategies.

**Make Prevention a Number One Priority**

It is difficult to get exact figures on the number of homicides, assaults, suicides, and other tragedies that occur at schools each year. School districts are not required to report crimes and violence. Historically, districts have tried to maintain their independence from the judicial system and often do not report crimes to authorities. However, more accountability likely will be required of our schools and administrators in the very near future.

Regrettably, there are increasing numbers of students and adults with severe psychiatric disorders who are not being attended to in community or mental health settings. According to Pitcher & Poland (1992) reasons may fall into the following categories: (a) the child/adolescent or the family does not recognize the need for mental health services, (b) the child and the family are so dysfunctional they cannot organize involvement with community agencies, (c) no low-cost or affordable alternatives are available within reasonable distance, or (d) for one reason or another, the child and family have "burned their bridges" with other local mental health agencies.

Psychologists should advocate steps in the direction of prevention as well as intervention. Thus, the general requirement for skills is actually twofold: (a) to establish crisis management procedures that support effective coping/management behavior during extreme emotional states and that will help to return the system to normal functioning as quickly as possible; and (b) to introduce crisis prevention activities that will reduce the probability that the crisis will recur (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). Throughout a crisis, a continual push must be maintained to look beyond just "surviving" the present situation.

Psychologists should be a proactive force to use each crisis experience as a learning experience. Even though crises occur unpredictably in the course of a professional lifetime, psychologists can be assured they will experience multiple opportunities to practice their skills. It is possible and necessary to plan for them, just as we do for fires, tornadoes, and bomb threats.

**Prepared and Ready to Intervene**

Thankfully, the emerging trend is for school districts to be more active following a crisis. Psychologists should be prepared to intervene by conducting informal or formal assessments; making recommendations, referrals, consulting with parents and other professionals, and following up on the disposition of the case or students.

Students or schools in crisis need immediate attention in order to restore normal emotional functioning or at least to stabilize emotional functioning (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). It seems logical and appropriate that psychologists working in the schools take primary responsibility for rendering psychological first aid.

Pitcher & Poland (1992) suggest that psychologists focus on these four school related crisis skills arenas: (a) working directly with the individuals in crisis (e.g., suicidal students, behaviorally out-of-control students, victims of physical or sexual abuse), (b) consulting with professionals who work with individuals in crisis (e.g., teachers, especially those of "at-risk" students, counselors, and principals), (c) intervening during and just after a disaster when large numbers of staff and students are in crisis, and (d) consulting with administrators to develop a district-wide comprehensive crisis management system.

Even though children are resilient, it is

necessary for psychologists to take the lead in seeing that a number of steps outlined by the National Institute of Mental Health are followed:

1. School personnel are encouraged to seek out children who need their help.
2. Children need to be provided with opportunities to express their emotions and be given permission for a range of emotions. The most common reactions that children have to a crisis are fear of future bad events, regression in behavior, and difficulty sleeping.
3. Parents need to be provided with information about childhood reactions to crisis as well asspecific suggestions about how to assist their child. This strategy can be accomplished by conducting a meeting with parents as quickly as possible.
4. Psychologists should work closely with building staff who know the students. The psychologist can prepare the school counselors, teachers, and administrators to be responsible for different intervention components and to employ these basic techniques: (a) keep the staff and students together who have experienced a crisis; (b) let everyone tell their story so others can learn that their feelings are normal; (c) help should come from those known to the survivors as much as possible, such as local counselors and clergy; (d) provide emotional support as quickly as possible; (e) remember they are survivors, not victims; (f) allow ventilation of feelings; (g) provide support and referral information; (h) help survivors prepare for the future; and (i) assist survivors to replace visual images of the injured or dead with positive ones.

Psychologists can provide and supervise crisis intervention activities at three levels in the schools. It is not enough to respond only to the initial needs of the school when a crisis occurs. Psychologists can help school administrators in determining the long term affects of the crisis and, most importantly, what can be done to prevent a crisis in the future (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). Primary prevention activities would be devoted to preventing a crisis from occurring (e.g., developing conflict resolution, gun safety, and safe driving programs). Secondary intervention steps would be taken in the immediate aftermath of a crisis to keep the crisis from escalating and minimize its effects (e.g., quickly removing students from potentially dangerous situations, leading a classroom discussion on death and loss immediately after a death of student or teacher). Lastly, postvention would entail providing on-going assistance to those who experienced a serious crisis (e.g., weekly counseling for those who survived a school bus accident for the remainder of the year with follow-up after that).

Some students will need a longer period to recover from a crisis. Psychologists in the schools are able to consult with parents, provide counseling, make referrals to agencies, and monitor the student's progress at school. Follow-up may last from a brief period of a few weeks to a year or more depending upon students' abilities to progress and support systems available to them.

### What We Need to Avoid

Some administrators are still resistant to seeking help for students in crisis. An example is a tragic shooting that occurred at an elementary school in Illinois near the end of the school year in 1988. This incident was described in detail by Dillard (1989), the school psychologist. He was at the central office when the incident occurred and made immediate plans to go to the school only to be told by superiors to stay away. Although Dillard had no idea about the appropriate duties

to perform he felt a need to go to the scene. As a result Dillard became the advocate for the students having opportunities to process the incident that had occurred and, in fact, held meetings with students and parents throughout the summer.

We do not want to be left out when psychologists are capable of providing a very necessary service to the schools. In districts that have not yet developed crisis plans, psychologists can offer that assistance. When a crisis occurs, district psychologists should go to the school; talk with the principal and counselors; volunteer to meet with the teachers before personnel talk with students; take supplies such as paper, crayons, and puppets to assist in counseling with younger students; provide referral lists, crisis hotline cards, and contract forms; and counsel students, either individually or in groups. In districts with well developed crisis plans, psychologists occasionally should remind principals and personnel of their expertise and ability to alter their schedule to go quickly to a school in crisis.

A national trend is emerging to hold school personnel more accountable for crisis planning and intervention. In fact one state, South Carolina, has passed legislation requiring that each school have a crisis plan. National goals have been set to make our schools drug and violence free by the year 2000 and President Clinton is working with Congress to consider legislation to provide funds for schools to implement safety and conflict resolution programs. Many administrators have written moving first person accounts of the day that tragedy struck their school and have called for other schools to take preparatory action (Poland, 1989).

As youth suicide continues to increase, so grows the number of cases where schools have been sued after the suicide of a student. The key issue is not whether or not the school somehow caused the suicide, but whether the school failed to take reasonable steps to prevent it. Schools have a responsibility to have prevention programs in place, foresee that a student who is threatening suicide is at-risk, take steps to supervise that student, and obtain psychological help for them. School personnel also must notify parents whenever they have reason to believe a student is suicidal.

Pitcher & Poland (1992) discussed the reluctance of school personnel to process numerous crisis incidents. Psychologists in the schools who have difficulty in getting principals and superintendents to devote time to crisis planning may want to focus their energies on related topics (Burneman, 1995). It is very important to be persistent and keep writing crisis plans and providing those that are reluctant with books, journal articles and newspaper clippings about crisis situations. The sad reality is that most school crisis planning occurs only after a tragedy.

### The Ultimate Consultant

Psychologists in the schools can become indispensable by providing expertise and services beyond those that they have offered in the past. By taking the initiative to develop crisis plans, lead inservices, and serve on crisis teams, psychologists not only will empower personnel to intervene during tragic events, but demonstrate that they are indispensable in the provision of critical services. Psychologists have the opportunity to become the architect, initiator, trainer, service provider, and principal's advisor—the ultimate consultant and indispensable to any school district.

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